

Palmer, S



Testimony
EDUCATION COMMITTEE
March 15, 2010

Sharon M. Palmer

Good afternoon Senator Gaffey, Representative Fleischmann and members of the Education Committee. I am Sharon Palmer, President of AFT Connecticut, a diverse 28,000 member AFL-CIO union.

I am here today to remark on H.B. 5491 An Act Concerning Certain School District Reforms to Reduce the Achievement Gap in Connecticut.

The parent petition, known as the parent trigger, calls for a negative action by signing a petition to close a school. We believe it has the potential to split school communities, scatter children to other schools and not significantly involve parents in their child's school. The decision regarding a school would still remain with local and State Boards of Education. We believe positive action by parents has the greatest potential for school improvement. Studies have shown that family involvement in a child's education and school improves a child's academic achievement, behavior, attendance and physical well-being. Teachers are more likely to remain in schools where many parents are involved with the school and where they report mutual respect and trust among parents and teachers.

We recognize and acknowledge that these things are not easy to accomplish. If they were, we would have done them long ago. Four years ago we worked with others to begin developing the CommPACT school model which has a strong parent involvement component. Ninety percent (90%) of parents must vote to be involved in the program. The parents also vote on their choice of academic program for their

AFT Connecticut
AFL-CIO

Healthcare
Higher Education
Public Employees
PSRP
Teachers

35 Marshall Road
Rocky Hill, CT 06067
860/257-9782
Fax: 860/257-8214
Toll Free: 800/398-3373
www.aftct.org

Sharon Palmer
PRESIDENT

Melodie Peters
FIRST VICE PRESIDENT

Leo Canty
SECOND VICE PRESIDENT

Thomas Bruenn
SECRETARY-TREASURER

VICE PRESIDENTS

John Altieri
Ronda Barker
Erin Benham
Dennis Bogusky
Joanne Chapin
David Cicarella
Art Costa, Jr.
Tom Culley
Tanya Crump
Kathie Daly
Patti Fusco
Betty Gadson
Andrea Johnson
Patrica M. Keavney
Phyllis Kornfeld
Paul Krell
Ann Lohrand
Jean Morningstar
Chuck Morrell
Harry Rodriguez
Kathleen Sanner
Rick Tanasi



child. AFT Connecticut has met with Gwen Samuels from the State of Black Connecticut and we have asked the Graustein Foundation to help us sponsor a number of forums with parents and teachers. We have met with the Black and Latino Caucus of the legislature to discuss the need for finding positive ways to involve parents in school reform.

In short, we want the whole school community involved in positive ways to engage and empower parents, not negative "one-shot" actions. We pledge our support to work with those who share this vision for real change.

We support establishing a Performance Evaluation Advisory Council. We believe it is this council which should make recommendations to the legislature, rather than the prescriptive language in Section 3 of the bill. We do not believe the ideas in Section 3 have been adequately discussed, vetted or have consensus. Parents are not included in the membership of the council. They should be.

We enthusiastically support the establishment of a task force regarding the academic achievement gap. We have three suggestions:

1. If we are serious about closing the achievement gap, the task force should do more than study, monitor, consider effective approaches and then submit a report with findings and recommendations. It should be charged to develop an action plan to close the gap.
2. The bill states who it shall appoint to the task force, but does not clearly state who shall serve. We suggest that urban parents and education representatives should be mandated.

3. Four months to accomplish this task is not respectful of the importance of closing the achievement gap. Much more time is needed if we want real and substantive solutions.

We are all painfully aware of the achievement gap. Our union stands ready to work with all the stakeholders to close the gap.

Thank you for providing this hearing opportunity.